DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 186 844 CS 005 408

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TITLE Teaching Reading through Children's Books, Poetry, and Song.
PUB DATE 17 May 80
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Reading/Language Arts Conference (Lawrenceville, NJ, May 17, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Beginning Reading; *Childrens Literature; Language Acquisition; *Language Arts; Music Activities; *Poetry; Primary Education; Reading Instruction; Reading Readiness; Teaching Methods; *Writing (Composition); Writing Exercises
IDENTIFIERS *Songs

ABSTRACT

An approach to teaching reading and writing through the use of children's books, poetry, and songs are described. It is suggested that reading be taught by presenting in chart form the words that already have been remembered orally in song, rhyme, or story, such as "Polly Put the Kettle On" or sections from the "Little Red Hen." In this approach, words are put on cards; sentence patterns are supplied by substituting words in familiar rhymes or stories; and oral discussion is used to develop comprehension. The premise of the approach is that children can write easily if they have ideas that are related to each other, words to express the ideas, some pattern or form to follow, and the skill to write the word. (MKM)

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TEACHING READING THROUGH CHILDREN'S BOOKS, POETRY, AND SONG

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Language has meaning, or it isn't language. Language also has forms; oral form, written form, the form of body language, the language of music, etc. Children will learn any language that they experience and they will learn it in the form or forms that they experience it. To the degree that the language is comprehensible the more easily the language will be learned. Children need to experience language in its fullness to be able to understand intuitively the function of language and the function of the particular form. As children work with language in its fullness they can be taught to extract the bits and pieces. One of the simplest, and perhaps the one necessary, requisite in learning to work with written language is to hear the language of literature, the language of books. The best oral reading is from children's books.

Children learn to speak with little apparent difficulty from their experiences with oral language. No one directly sets out to teach children to speak; children are surrounded by oral language, and they learn to speak. The richer the surrounding the richer the language that is learned. Children begin uttering syllables or words. We think that the child in making such utterances is trying to say a sentence or a paragraph, some total bit of meaning such as, "Mother, I'm lonely, wet and hungry, and I wish you were here paying some attention to me," even though all the child utters is, "MMMuh." They understand intuitively that oral language is for communicating. We need to begin with written language that is just as meaningful if children are to be able to see any purpose and learn the written form. The function of written language is likely to be obscure if we use letters or words as the beginning experiences with written language. Much better to begin with some

total piece of writing, a song, a poem, or an old tale. We must make certain that children begin with a full piece of written language, with pieces of language that are rich and meaningful. From these children can begin to understand how letters, syllables, and words work.

We begin orally singing or chanting one or more songs or poems. When the children have learned the song or poem orally, we present it visually, and have the children work with the pieces. For example, we take the simple nursery rhyme Polly Put the Kettle On. We have both chanted and sung this with five or six-year old children until they know it well. We present the rhyme in the pocket chart, using word cards, and having the children help us to build the second and third lines once we have presented the first line. This is primarily a matching exercise.

Polly	put	the	kettle	on
Polly	put	the	kettle	on
Polly	put	the	kettle	on
We'll	all	have	tea	

We substitute the children's names for Polly, putting each child's name on a card and placing it on top of a Polly. With each three children's names we chant or sing the song again. We provide small groups of children with a set of cards for the whole poem and allow them to build the poem on the floor, and we allow children to work individually with the cards.

We suggest to the children that we are tired of putting the kettle on and we develop orally ideas of what else can be put on, and we expand the meaning of the preposition through this brainstorming. We can merely repeat the putting on concept by putting on the frying pan, the toaster, etc., but

this requires at least that we change the last line to we'll all have pancakes, or eggs, or we'll all have toast. Children may make their own copies of their favourite so that several versions may be written in booklet form to be shared and read and reread.

We will brainstorm and make additional changes, such as put on your flippers, put on your swim suit, put on your mask and then we'll all go snorkling. In this, however, we follow the children using their ideas within the structure of the original.

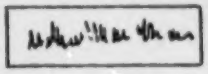
We will read one version or several versions of The Little Red Hen selecting one to be read several times until the story is well known by all the children. We will present the repeated part to the children visually in the pocket chart, and perhaps from the third or fourth reading have them chant the repeated parts over and over as we read the book.

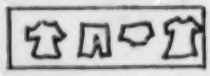
"Not	I,"	said	the	cat.			
"Not	I,"	said	the	dog.			
"Not	I,"	said	the	mouse.			
"Then	I	will,"	said	the	Little	Red	Hen.
And	she	did.					

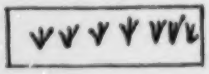
After these have been chanted two or three times, small groups of children prepare the pocket chart for a reading, by taking the stack of cards and placing them in the pocket chart.

Further, we brainstorm for all the things that the Little Red Hen did. In the story she mowed the lawn, washed the clothes, cooked the meals, etc. as well

as all the things that occurred after finding the grain of wheat. We draw pictures on the chalkboard representing mow the lawn, wash the clothes, etc. These are hastily drawn with the children helping to tell us how to make the lawn look more like a lawn and the clothes more like clothes, so that the board looks like this:

mow the 

wash the 

hoe the 

etc.

Next, we put the question: Who will help me _____? over our work and we read each in turn, responding to each question with the chant that we have already learned, "Not I," said the dog, etc.

We can work to put the items into the sequence found in the story, and we will notice that the first groups of items, the mowing the lawn, the washing the clothes, etc. are put there by author's choice, but the finding of the seed, the planting of the seed, the watering of the seed, etc. must be in sensible sequence.

We can now write class versions of this story if we wish. The Easter bunny can find an egg, carry it home, cook it, colour it, and finally deliver it to a joyous child all by himself. We would write such a story with the children's help for ideas and make it into a large book on 24 x 36 in sheets of paper or tag board so that the class can read the finished version in unison. The children may make the illustrations. We may make a dittoed version of a

smaller size so that each child can have his own copy. We will have 5 to 10 versions of our favourite edition of The Little Red Hen in the classroom so that the children can practice, and we will have single versions of other editions so that children can work with many versions of the well known story as they learn about words. We will use simply written books such as ROSIE'S WALK by Pat Hutchins (Collier Macmillan Canada Ltd., 1968), or THE VISIT by Diane Wolkstein (Alfred A. Knopf, N.Y., 1977).

In Rosie's Walk, "Rosie the hen went for a walk.
She went across the yard,
around the pond, ... etc.
And got back home in time for dinner."

Throughout the walk Rosie is pursued by a fox intent upon feasting upon Rosie, who has a series of mishaps that prevent his pouncing. Rosie is oblivious to the pursuit.

In The Visit, an ant goes for a walk.
"She walked over a stone, step by step.
She walked over a leaf, step by step...etc."
Visits a friend and then retraces her steps and,
"got home just before dark"

Both of these books lend themselves to flannel board presentation where children move the ant or Rosie through the actions. Both of these lend themselves to dance or dramatic interpretation in the gym. Both of these lend themselves to extension whereby the middle of the story can be extended. Both lend themselves to parody. We brainstorm with children for animals that they know and like.

We brainstorm for places that the animals might be. For the very beginning children we present them with a structured story book as follows:

_____ went for a walk.

He went _____.

He went _____.

(perhaps 6-8 pages)

And got home in time for dinner.

The child writes, Elmer, the elephant went for a walk.

He went over the street.

He went by the tree.

etc.

With older children we provide the pattern in the pocket chart and they write the whole story themselves, with each child creating a version uniquely his own. Of course, the stories are illustrated, read to each other, and become part of the class library.

We teach both reading and writing somewhat simultaneously. Reading is largely followed by analysis, while writing requires synthesis, the putting together of sounds into words and sentences. We use lots of poetry because simple poetry is easy to understand and frequently easier to imitate or parody. Poetry is just saying something nicely about something. Much of poetry is just lists about something. If we write lists and then put them together so that they sound nice, we may create a poem.

Children can write easily if they have:

1. ideas that are related to each other
2. words to express the ideas
3. some pattern or form
4. the skill or the means to write the words

We begin by writing the word witch on the chalkboard and drawing a line in front of it. We ask children what kind of witches they know. As they respond, we write their ideas in a list:

scary witches

old witches

scraggly witches

gnarled witches

wrinkled witches, etc.

As each word is added the children chant:

scary witches

old witches, scary witches

scraggly witches, old witches, scary witches, etc.

We brainstorm until we have forty words or more. More is better than less,

and less than forty will mean that the exercise is unlikely to succeed.

We draw a blank behind the word witches and brainstorm for what witches do getting such words as:

witches fly

screech

scream

meditate

chant, etc.

Again we try to get forty or more words, and again we chant as we record. We chant both lists, taking the first word from each list, and then the second:

scary witches fly

old witches screech

scraggly witches scream

gnarled witches meditate, etc.

Some combinations will make sense; some won't. We discuss or identify the nonsensical combinations. We chant and make more complex combinations chanting:

old, scraggly witches chant and meditate

scary, scraggly witches screech and scream, etc.

We record (usually two or more children are assigned to this task while the teacher writes on the chalkboard) each of the words on a 3 x 8 word card. We give each group of 4-6 children four cards saying witches and eight words from each list. We ask them to make some sentences following the pattern.

_____, _____, witches _____.

_____, _____, witches _____.

We all read and share the results.

We switch the pattern:

_____ witches _____ and _____. (The pupils need some and cards) and each group writes two or more sentences.

We brainstorm and make lists for:

1. where witches might be
2. how witches might chant or screech, etc.

These phrases are recorded and put onto phrase cards. Without formal labeling we have lists of adjectives, verbs, prepositional phrases and adverbs.

We read to children from witch books, books rich in witch language such as Ian Serrailier's Suppose You Met a Witch (From collected poems Belinda and the Swans, Jonathan Cape, Ltd. London, 1952. Also as a picture book Suppose You Met a Witch, illustrated by Ed Emberley, Little, Brown and Co., Boston and Toronto. 1973).

"Suppose you met a witch...there's one I know, all willow-gnarled and whiskered head to toe. We drowned her at Ten Foot Bridge last June, I think--but I've seen her often since a twilight time under the willows by the river-brink, skimming the wool white meadow mist astride her broom o'beech..."
We extract willow-gnarled, whiskered, by the river brink, and more to add to our lists.

We ask the children to sort the cards in each list, telling them to put them into two piles in any way that makes sense to them. We recommend that two or three sets of cards be made if this is to be done with the whole class. When the words are classified, the pupils who do not know how the cards were sorted guess the classifications. Eventually, we affix each word or phrase card onto a long strip of masking tape. We hand the string lists, and now we have a list of ideas that are related to each other and words to express the ideas. All we need now is some pattern or form.

We have hinted about pattern or form. The blank-space phrases or sentences are a type of form. Any pattern that children already know, or any pattern that they can understand easily can serve as a guide for writing. We suggest free patterns rather than tightly structured patterns.

We use a simple pattern as follows:

tell how witches look	Witches look gnarled, witches look gray
tell how witches move	Witches run, witches fly
tell what witches do	Witches chant, witches brew
tell something they don't do	But they don't scare me.

OR

_____, _____ witches _____ _____

_____, _____ witches _____ _____

_____, _____ witches _____ _____

_____, _____ witches _____ _____

Old, gnarled witches brew near the haunted house

Young, modern witches fly on vacuum cleaners across the sky

Scary, wrinkled witches scream behind the school house

Sad, dumb witches cry into their brew.

We use a more complicated pattern. We <u>sing a song of six pence</u>, <u>pocketful of rye</u>, etc. We have the whole song on a large chart; we sing, dance, or snap our fingers until we are sure everyone knows the song and feels its rhythm. We suggest that we sing a song of witches and we compose one or two take-off versions orally, record them on the chalkboard and sing them.

Sing a song of witches
Hovering near a cave
Shouting, screaming, screeching
Scaring knight and knave.
Suddenly its twelve o'clock

But they fly at night
They'll sing and wail
Behind the jail
Until the day is bright.

We use the pattern of 1, 2, buckle my shoe.

3, 4, shut the door.

writing: 1, 2, the witches are due, or witches near the flue, or witches brew, etc. We use the poem Bugs by Margaret Wise Brown as a pattern:

I like witches
Warty witches
Hairy witches
Wierdy witches
Scary witches
Any kind of witch
I like witches.

A witch on a broomstick
A witch in the air
A witch brewing newts
A witch on the stair
I like witches.

Old witches
Young witches
gnarled witches
Nasty witches
Itchy witches
I like witches.

We work with couplets or quatrains and discover rhyme and alliteration. We build these in the pocket chart, shifting the words to demonstrate to children how words may be manipulated. We have the pupils manipulate the words with word cards. (The physical manipulation of the word cards seems necessary for many children if they are going to be able to respond freely when writing independently.) For example:

Old witches fly

Sad witches cry

Bold witches prey

Young witches play.

is reorganized in the pocket chart to read merely,

Old witches fly

Young witches play

Sad witches cry

Bold witches prey.

We can reorganize by putting the word witches last in each line and asking the children to make the words make sense. We find that they quickly say:

Old, flying witches

Young, playing witches

Sad, crying witches

Bold, preying witches.

So we make cards with ing affixed. We build one or two sets of alliterative sentences and then the children can create their own:

Wicked, warty witches wobble and whine while whisking around the world.

Colorful, classy witches creep and climb.

With all of these word strings we can turn the children to creating poetry in any one of their chosen forms. Each of the string lists is a poem in itself. From this oral input and the visual recording children can write easily. We get such poems as:

I wish I was a witch.
I would play in the air,
brew in the woods,
scare boys and girls,
catch newts and toads,
I wish I was a witch.

Cackling witches in the meadow
Brewing witches in the woods
Newts and toads
Worms and mice
Chanting witches
near the bridge
Beware, it's Halloween.

We introduce poems such as Mina Lewiton Simon's Is Anyone Here? (McClelland and Stewart, Ltd. Canada, 1967) and use the first part as a model.

Is anyone here?
Is anyone here where the sea
nibbles the land of rock and sand?
Is anyone tall,
is anyone small,
sunning
or crawling
or plodding
or running?
Is anyone near?
Is anyone here?

No one is here!
No one EXCEPT
a digger-wasp burrowing
a wolf-spider hurrying
a lion-ant scurrying,...

We develop witch versions as sample parodies so that children may create their own.

Is anyone here?
Is anyone here where the secrets
of the night are kept from sight?
Is anyone by,
is anyone high,
sighing
or moaning
or groaning
or crying?

Is any one near?
Is anyone here?

No one is here!
No one EXCEPT
a wily witch brewing
a warty witch stewing
a wierd witch chewing
a wicked witch spewing
Where the rusty cauldron rumbles in the dark, rainy night.

We read orally to children with books to stretch their minds. We develop all the comprehension "reading" skills from oral reading. After all recalling facts, making inferences, drawing conclusions, sequencing events, understanding

vocabulary in context, etc. are only labels for the brain's way of thinking. It seems to us that these skills need not be done after children have looked at the words in a book in order to have the brain function. Many children are limited in their word recognizing ability. Many are slow as they are learning to read. The books and stories that they read and enjoy have little to provoke thinking. It is much better to use the limited time of school with material that is challenging, a bit mystifying, and worth thinking about.

We use films for this same purpose. The Weston Woods collection contains the best of American picture books and some of the best from the rest of the English writing world. (Weston Woods Studios, Weston, Connecticut, U.S.A.; Weston, Ontario, Canada; Sydney, N.S.W. Australia.)

We do one other major activity, uninterrupted, sustained, silent reading, an idea originated by Lyman C. Hunt, Jr. of the University of Vermont. Very simply, this is a period when everyone in the classroom reads from a book of his or her own choice. This must include the teacher or the procedure founders. There are no interruptions and the time is 5-15 minutes with 5-6 year old children and 20 or more with older children. U.S.S.R. is essentially a practice period when used this way. It may become a teaching period if the teacher shares the thoughts and the responses she has had while reading, attempting by short talks to describe what silent reading is for her. This modelling is a powerful teaching technique over a period of years. The children are required to do nothing following U.S.S.R., but they will imitate the teacher in sharing, and this is encouraged.

Throughout these activities the teacher emphasizes the sounds and sense of language. She makes certain that children experience language fully. She teaches so the children hear language, see that some language is in written

form, and that children work with language, both orally and written, until they learn about it. This is a process of maturing which never ends.